Nuffield Foundation

INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

PERFORMANCE TRACKER | LOCAL

Educational outcomes across England

Examining the attainment gap in schools

Amber Dellar

About this report

This report looks at the variation in the performance of pupils at state-funded schools, comparing area characteristics to examine what might explain differences across England and over time. It is part of the Institute for Government's Performance Tracker Local series, supported by Nuffield Foundation.

@ instituteforgov.bsky.social
www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

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Summary

Schools are one of the few public service success stories in England over the last decade and a half. Indeed, of the nine public services we assess in our Performance Tracker series, state-funded schools are alone in having performed better in 2024 than in 2010.[1] That decade saw educational attainment increase, and disparities narrow, across England's schools – but this progress was brought to a shuddering halt when Covid hit.

The effects of the pandemic – with schools closed for long periods, valuable learning time lost and exams and other functions severely disrupted – saw much of this progress undone. Since 2019, educational inequalities have again grown wider and more pronounced, both across the country and among various demographic groups, with some areas and groups now lagging far behind others.

It is these disparities this report seeks to examine.

Breaking down the national picture

This report is the latest in the Institute for Government's new Performance Tracker: Local series, supported by the Nuffield Foundation, that analyses the performance of England's key public services at a subnational level. In it, we analyse pupil performance at a local authority level between 2019 and 2024 to understand local variation and the extent to which it relates to area characteristics.

Examining performance at the local level helps us understand how the pandemic affected children's education. Identifying where and to what extent educational outcomes have changed, and who is at risk of being 'left behind', can shed light on the causes of these growing disparities and highlight opportunities for improvement. With the new government aiming to break the link between a child's background and their future success, as part of its opportunity mission, the findings in this report should give it pause.

Key findings

- **Performance gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers have widened considerably since 2019.** Children's relative disadvantage (measured here primarily, and albeit imperfectly, by factors centring on eligibility for free school meals) appears most closely tied to learning loss over the pandemic. Educational outcomes for disadvantaged White pupils have been particularly poor.

- **Some areas still see disadvantaged pupils doing well – particularly where a greater proportion of children are disadvantaged.** There are places where disadvantaged pupils perform better than the average non-disadvantaged pupil nationally, suggesting that schools are better able to tailor their support for less advantaged pupils where there are more of them.

- **In areas where disadvantaged pupils do well, schools tend to perform better overall.** Given the variation among disadvantaged pupils' attainment described above, this means there is a gulf in *overall* performance between the worst- and best-performing local areas. This problem has not appeared to right itself: many of these disparities have continued to grow since the end of the pandemic.

- **Pupils in London outperform those in the rest of the country and this gap too has grown since 2019.** Some of this likely reflects the capital's distinctive demographic mix and, among other things, its draw as a place to work – for example, attracting better-qualified staff.

How we measure performance in schools

This report uses three metrics to understand how state-funded schools are performing across the country: pupils' attainment at the end of primary and secondary school, and their progress between these two points.* We analyse these performance measures for all pupils, and separately for disadvantaged pupils, to understand the drivers of educational disparities.

Table 1 **Measures of school performance**

Performance measure	Phase of education	Metric
Key Stage 2 (KS2) attainment	End of primary school	Proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths
Key Stage 4 (KS4) attainment	End of secondary school	Proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 (a 'standard pass') in GCSE English and maths
KS4 progress	Progress between the ends of primary and secondary school	Progress 8 score. This measures the progress that pupils make between KS2 and KS4 relative to pupils with similar KS2 results. A progress score of +/- 1 means pupils performed an average of 1 grade better/worse in each of eight subjects at KS4 than others with a similar starting point

Notes: We have chosen the KS4 attainment metric over others for consistency with previous Institute for Government publications.

Progress scores are more contextualised than our other measures of performance because they take prior attainment into account. However, none of our performance metrics accounts for factors such as children's home environment or any special educational needs and disabilities,** which are strongly linked to pupil performance.*** They should therefore be interpreted with caution as measures of school quality.

* The report does not cover the progress made by pupils in primary schools as this data was not released in 2024 due to interruptions from Covid.

** The Institute for Government plans to look at the performance of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in upcoming work.

*** These contextual factors are, however, correlated with school quality, which makes accounting for them without also accounting for school quality difficult. For example, schools in highly deprived areas are more likely to struggle to attract highly qualified teachers.

Box 1 **Our data and methodology in brief**

This report examines primary and secondary state-funded schools in England (education being devolved) using publicly available data from the Department for Education (DfE). Most of our data covers the last six academic years, 2018–19 to 2023–24, to ensure that there is a pre-pandemic baseline.

We do not have access to pupil-level data. Instead, we use national-, regional- and local authority-level* observations of performance for all pupils, disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils. We use national-level data on the performance of pupils who speak English as an additional language, who belong to each 'minor ethnicity group' (as defined in the Census), and disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils within each minor ethnicity group.

We also use national-, regional- and local authority-level observations of a number of other variables, split by phase of education (primary and secondary): the rate of overall absences (for all pupils, disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils), the proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged,** the proportion speaking English as an additional language, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils from each minor ethnicity category and the level of per-pupil funding.***

Throughout this report, we use univariate and multivariate regression analysis to explore the relationships between these variables at a local authority level. The latter allows us to assess the relationship between two variables while 'controlling' for other factors, or assuming they are held constant. This does not let us say that one variable *causes* another, but that a high level in one tends to occur with a high (or low) level in the other.

Local authorities often cannot be held accountable for pupil performance, as the widespread academisation**** of schools – particularly secondaries[2] – has significantly reduced their oversight and influence. In our analysis, local authorities are used primarily as the geographical unit to examine how pupil characteristics and funding relate to educational outcomes across the country.

* We have excluded the Isles of Scilly and City of London from all of our local authority-level analysis due to low pupil numbers. And we exclude Rutland from all local authority-level analysis of disadvantaged pupils' performance, again because this is a particularly small group of pupils.

** Whenever we look at rates of disadvantage, we are looking at the proportion of pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at some point in the last six years. DfE also classifies as disadvantaged children who have been, or are currently, in the care of their local authority. A small number of children every year fall into this category. These children are included in our measures of performance among disadvantaged pupils, but not in our measure of disadvantage rates.

*** Measured by the schools block element of dedicated schools grant funding, in 2023/24 prices.

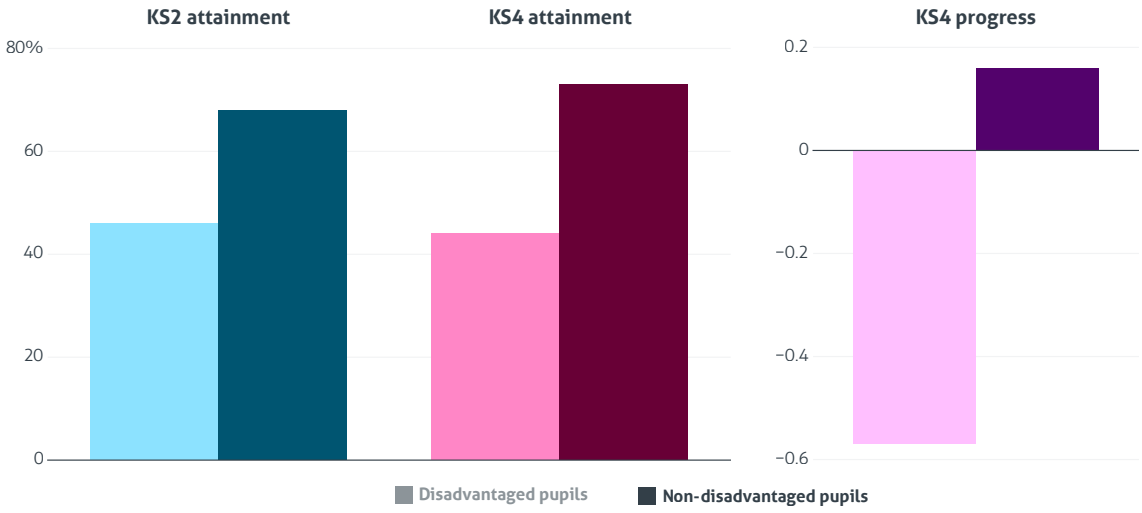
**** Academies are state-funded schools that are not overseen by councils.

Educational outcomes in 2024

In 2024, some 61% of pupils at Key Stage 2 (KS2)[1] in England met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths; while 65% achieved a 'standard pass' in their English and maths GCSEs (taken at the end of Key Stage 4, or KS4).[2] National 'KS4 progress' is close to 0 by definition as it compares pupils to their peers; in 2024 it was -0.03.[*,3]

On average, disadvantaged pupils do worse than their better-off counterparts at each of these milestones. The Department for Education (DfE) considers a child to be disadvantaged if they have been eligible for free school meals at some point in the last six years.[**] In 2023–24, just over a quarter of primary school pupils (26%) and slightly more secondary school pupils (27%) met this criterion.[4] Children who have been, or are currently, in the care of their local authority are also classified by DfE as disadvantaged, though this is a comparatively small number of children.

Figure 1 **KS2 and KS4 performance by disadvantage status, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024.
Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in their English and maths GCSEs. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8.

In 2024, fewer than half of disadvantaged pupils met expected standards at KS2 (46%) or achieved standard passes in their English and maths GCSEs (44%).[5,6] Their better-off peers' attainment was markedly higher – 68% and 73% respectively – making them 1.5 times likelier to meet the KS2 threshold, and 1.7 times likelier to meet the KS4 one.[7,8]

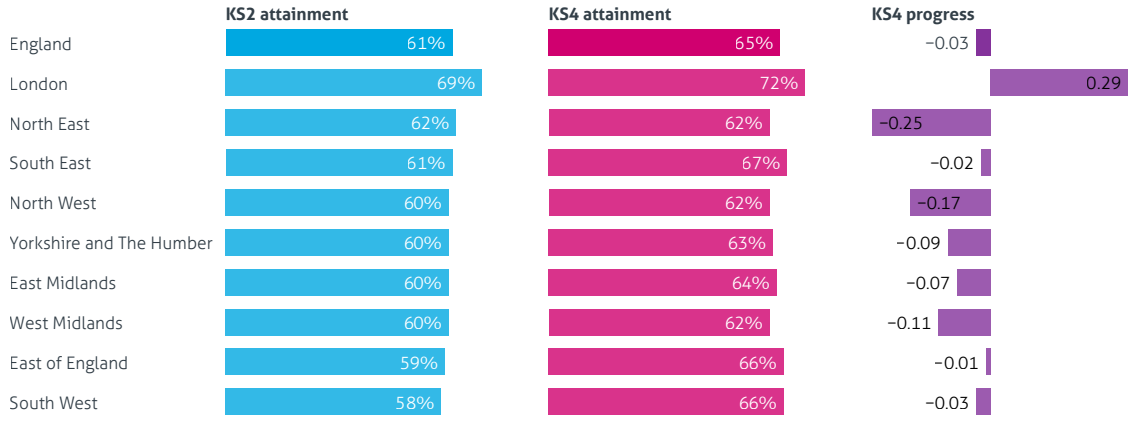
* When averaged across the whole of England, the difference between pupils' KS4 attainment and the KS4 attainment of pupils who performed similarly at KS2 is 0. It is -0.03 in 2024 because progress scores get calculated for pupils in special schools, even though those pupils' KS4 attainment is not included in the calculation of other pupils' progress scores.

** DfE changed the definition of free school meal eligibility in 2018, which impacted disadvantage statistics for the first time in 2024. The DfE reported that this had "minimal impact on ... disadvantage breakdowns" in 2024, and as such, we have treated statistics concerning disadvantage as continuous between 2019 and 2024.

Looking beyond attainment levels, disadvantaged pupils also made less academic progress during secondary school. On average, they performed half a grade worse in each of eight KS4 subjects than peers with a similar starting point (a progress score of -0.57).[9] Non-disadvantaged pupils, by contrast, performed nearly a sixth of a grade better in each subject than those with similar prior attainment (0.16).[10]

Educational outcomes vary widely across the country

Figure 2 **KS2 and KS4 performance, by region, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024.
Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 (a standard pass) in GCSE English and maths. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8.

Pupils in London achieved the highest average outcomes across all three measures in 2024, maintaining a long-standing advantage over the rest of the country. This gap emerges by KS2, where London's attainment of 69% was 8 percentage points (ppts) above the national rate of 61% in 2024.[*,11] Outside London, KS2 attainment was within 3ppts of the national figure.[12]

London was also the only region with a positive KS4 progress score in 2024. Its pupils performed nearly a third of a grade better in each KS4 subject than would be expected given their performance at KS2.[13] In all other regions, the average pupil performed worse at KS4 than peers across the country who started secondary school at a similar level.[14]

By contrast, pupils in the North East and North West tend to underperform. In 2024, these regions' KS2 attainment was 60% and 62% respectively, on par with the national rate of 61%.[15] But attainment in these regions tends to drop off by the end of secondary school. As a result, the average pupil in the North East and North West scored between a sixth and a quarter of a grade worse in each KS4 subject than would be expected given their KS2 attainment.[16] The North East has had the worst regional KS4 progress since the new GCSE grading system was fully rolled out in 2019.[**,17] In

* London has a smaller advantage at KS4 than KS2 in 2024, despite having a positive progress score. This is because these results are for different cohorts. This implies that the KS2 gap is bigger for pupils who took the assessments in 2024 than for those who took them in 2019, aligning with our analysis below that the London gap has grown.

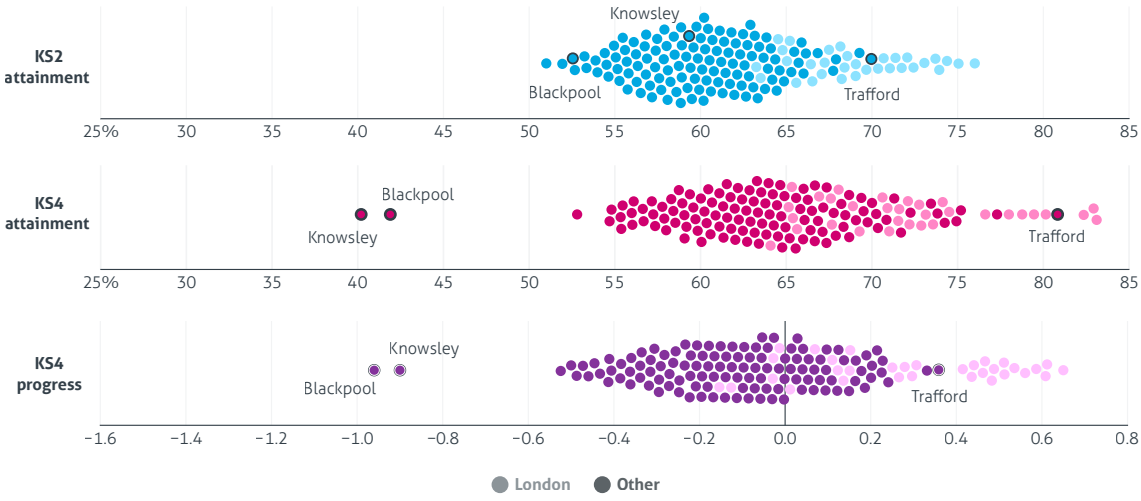
** KS4 progress scores were not published in 2020 and 2021.

2024, it was the only region where non-disadvantaged pupils did not have a positive average progress score, meaning that on average they performed no better than peers with similar prior attainment.[18]

There is a gulf between the best- and worst-performing local areas

There is greater variation in educational outcomes at a local authority level than there is regionally. At the lower end two local authorities saw just half of pupils reach the KS2 expected standard in 2024; at the upper end seven local authorities, all in London, saw three-quarters do so.[*,19] This disparity is even more stark at KS4: in Kingston upon Thames, Richmond, Sutton, Barnet and Trafford (the only non-London authority), KS4 attainment was above 80% – around double what it was in Knowsley and Blackpool in the North West (40% and 42% respectively).[20]

Figure 3 **KS2 and KS4 performance, by local authority, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024.
Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in their English and maths GCSEs. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8. Isles of Scilly and City of London excluded.

Knowsley and Blackpool have been the two worst-performing areas at GCSE since at least 2019.[21] And in 2024, their average progress scores were nearly 0.4 points worse than in any other local authority area, at -0.90 and -0.96 respectively.[22] Pupils in these two places performed nearly one grade worse on average in each of eight KS4 subjects than pupils with similar KS2 attainment in other areas. For comparison, progress in the London borough of Kingston upon Thames, the best-performing area, was 0.65.[23]

While London dominates, it is not the only region with high-performing areas. Eight non-London local authority areas had better KS4 attainment than the London average in 2024.[24] For KS2 attainment and KS4 progress, however, only two non-London areas achieve this feat.[25] Trafford, a grammar schools area in Greater Manchester, notably scores better than the London average on all three performance measures,[**] meaning

* If KS2 attainment were rounded to the nearest 5%, two local authority areas had attainment of 50% and seven had attainment of 75%.

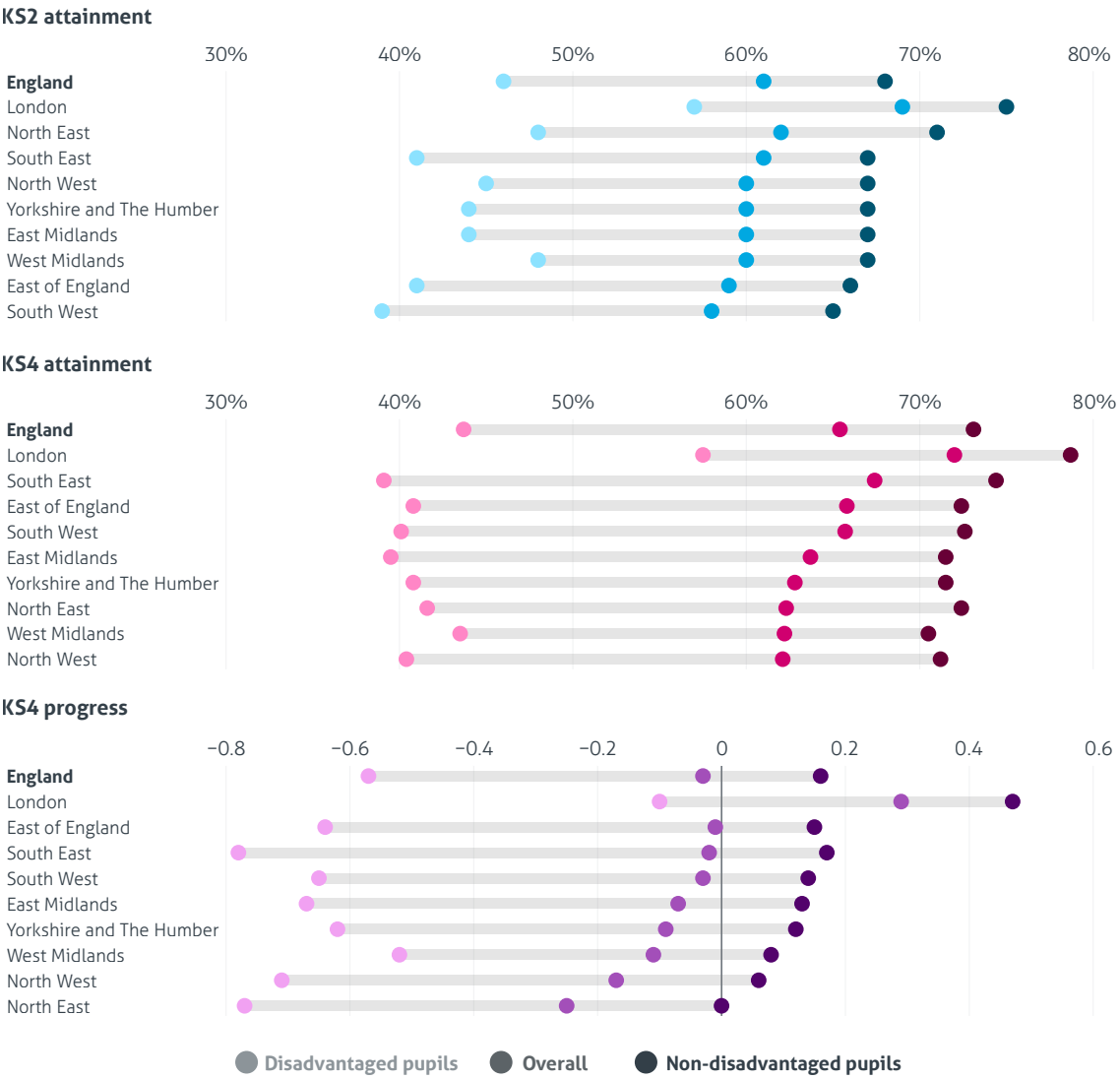
** This is not to say that grammar schools boost performance overall. Research tends to show that they are bad for social mobility. Grammar school areas tend to attract high-attaining non-disadvantaged pupils from other areas. But disadvantaged pupils in these areas who do not attend grammar schools perform worse than the national average.

that the North West is home to the one of the best-performing areas as well as the two worst-performing ones.*

Areas with more disadvantaged pupils tend to have worse educational outcomes

The uneven distribution of disadvantaged pupils across the country helps to explain some of the geographical variation in educational outcomes. Areas with higher rates of disadvantage tend to perform worse, reflecting the fact that disadvantaged pupils typically attain and progress less than their peers.

Figure 4 **KS2 and KS4 performance, by region and disadvantage status, 2024**



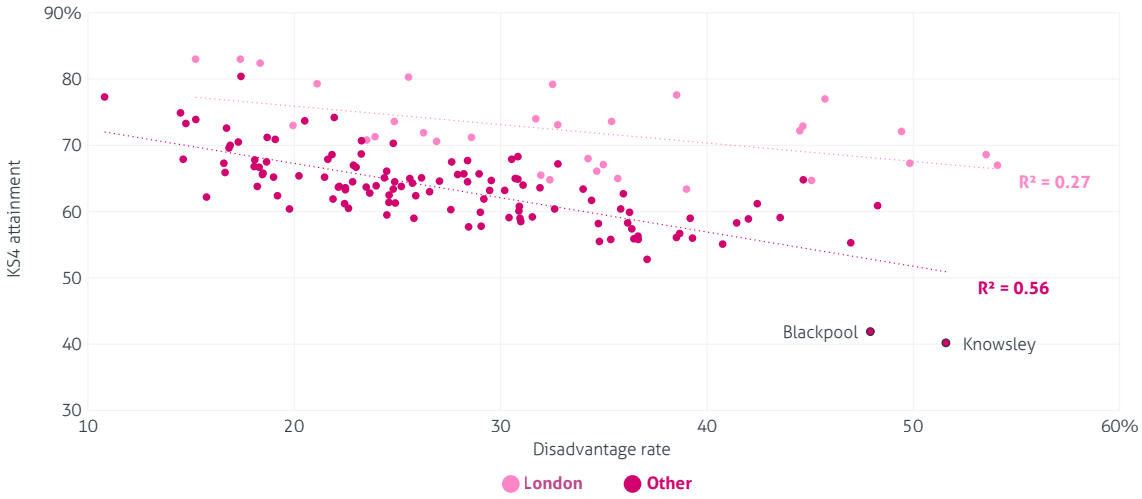
Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024.
Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in GCSE English and maths. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8.

* With local authorities as the units of analysis. The North West had the highest standard deviation (8) in KS4 attainment in 2024 of any region. Other regions' range between 4 and 6. It also had the highest standard deviation (0.29) in KS4 progress in 2024 of any region. Other regions' range between 0.12 and 0.24.

There is a clear regional divide in disadvantage across England, with particularly low rates in the South East, South West and East of England. In 2023–24, little over a fifth of primary and secondary pupils there had been eligible for free school meals at some point in the last six years (21–22%).[26] And in 2024, these three regions had the highest KS4 attainment and KS4 progress after London.[27] The North East and West Midlands are at the other end of the spectrum, with around a third of pupils classified as such (31–34%).[28] They were among the worst-performing regions at KS4.[29]

This pattern persists at a local authority level. Areas with a greater share of disadvantaged pupils tend to have worse KS4 attainment and progress:* Knowsley and Blackpool, for example, reported that around half of pupils attending secondary school had been eligible for free school meals at some point in the last six years, compared to around a quarter nationwide (27%).[30] (That said, their performance is still far below other similarly deprived areas'; multiple attempts to improve schools in Knowsley and Blackpool do not seem to have worked.)**,[31]

Figure 5 **KS4 attainment compared to disadvantage rate, by local authority, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024 and DfE, 'Schools pupils and their characteristics', 2023–24. Notes: KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in GCSE English and maths. The disadvantage rate is calculated for secondary school pupils only. City of London and Isles of Scilly are excluded.

Interestingly, disadvantage rates have less of an effect on KS4 attainment and progress in London than they do elsewhere.*** Figure 5 illustrates this for KS4 attainment: the 'line of best fit' (dotted on the chart) for London is shallower than it is for rest of the country. For local authorities outside the capital, having 10ppts more disadvantaged pupils in secondary school is associated with a 5.2ppts lower KS4 attainment and a 0.16 point lower progress score, on average. Performance in London only falls by half

* See Regression 1 in the Methodology for the full results.

** Both were involved in the Excellence in Cities programme in 1999, which aimed to raise standards in urban schools. In 2008, Building Schools for the Future targeted capital investment towards schools in both areas. In 2015, the Blackpool Challenge was launched – modelled on the London Challenge – to encourage collaboration between schools and drive up pupil progress. Knowsley and Blackpool are now part of the DfE's education investment areas programme, which began in 2022. This programme offers funding packages to the English local authorities that have the weakest sustained educational outcomes.

*** See Regression 2 in the Methodology for the full results.

as much.* This discrepancy results from the gap between the attainment/progress of disadvantaged pupils and their better-off counterparts being smaller in London than in the rest of the country (see Figure 4).

But there are some significant exceptions

Areas with more disadvantaged pupils do not always perform worse than areas with fewer. For one thing, as well as the negative effect we discuss here, high disadvantage rates also appear to have a positive effect on an area's overall educational performance: disadvantaged pupils perform better when disadvantage rates are higher (covered in detail below). Indeed, in the case of KS2 attainment, the two effects roughly cancel each other out.

As shown in Figure 4, the South East, South West and East of England (the least disadvantaged regions) do not do particularly well at KS2, and the North East and West Midlands (the most disadvantaged) do not do particularly badly. There is also no relationship between KS2 attainment and rates of primary school disadvantage at a local authority level.**

There are two further ways in which disadvantaged pupils' underperformance relative to their better-off peers does not tell the whole story. First, disadvantaged pupils' performance varies widely across England. Second, London vastly outperforms other regions despite having a middling-to-high rate of disadvantage.*** The next sections cover these two issues in turn.

There is large variation in performance among disadvantaged pupils around the country

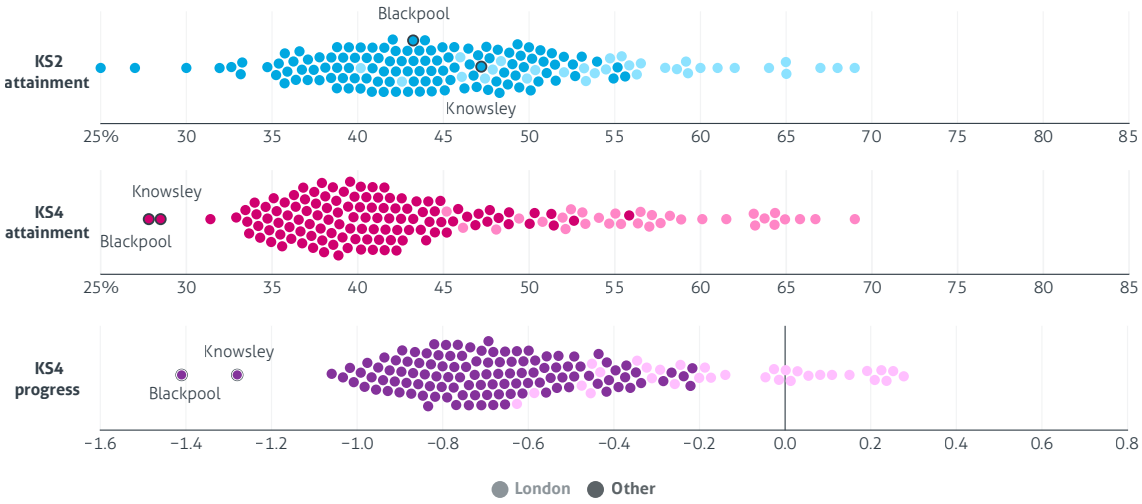
At a local authority level in 2024, disadvantaged pupils' KS2 attainment ranged from 25% to 69%, KS4 attainment from 28% to 69%, and progress scores from -1.41 to 0.27.[32] Knowsley and Blackpool stand out again, posting the lowest KS4 attainment and progress for disadvantaged children in the country.[33] Blackpool's progress score of -1.41 means its disadvantaged pupils typically achieved nearly a grade and a half less in each of eight KS4 subjects than pupils with similar KS2 results.

* Its KS4 attainment falls by 2.8ppts (compared to 5.2 outside of London) and its progress by 0.07 points (compared to 0.16 outside of London). Note that within London, the relationship between disadvantage rates and KS4 progress is not significant at the 5% level – as Regression 1 shows.

** See Regression 1 in the Methodology for the full results.

*** At primary level, 27% of pupils in London are disadvantaged compared to 26% nationally. Its secondary school pupils are among the most deprived in the country (33% are disadvantaged compared to the national rate of 26%).

Figure 6 **Disadvantaged pupils' KS2 and KS4 performance, by local authority, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024.
Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in their English and maths GCSEs. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8. Isles of Scilly, City of London and Rutland excluded.

By contrast, disadvantaged pupils in London performed significantly better than disadvantaged pupils elsewhere. In fact, they performed only slightly worse than the average pupil in England (see Figure 4). For example, their KS2 attainment (57%) led other disadvantaged pupils' by 11ppts,* and trailed overall KS2 attainment in England (61%) by just 4ppts.[34]

These disparities are striking given that the low income threshold for free school meals leaves little variation in disadvantaged pupils' economic circumstance. Instead, the differences might point to variation in other factors, such as pupils' home environments, the duration of their disadvantage,[35] or how effectively particular schools meet their needs.

In some London boroughs, disadvantaged pupils even outperformed the average non-disadvantaged pupil in England. Newham, for example, had 69% of its disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard at KS2, just edging the national rate for non-disadvantaged pupils of 68%.[36] And disadvantaged pupils in six London boroughs made more progress at KS4 on average than better-off pupils nationally (0.16), and far more than non-disadvantaged pupils in areas such as Blackpool (-0.51).[37]

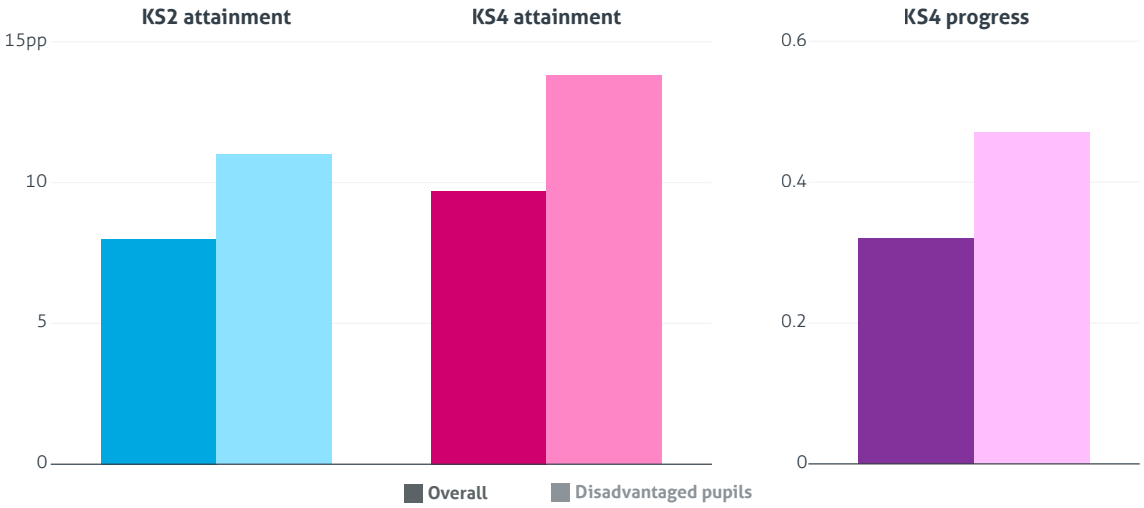
* The gap is 13ppts if London is excluded from the national figure and each pupil is weighted equally – disadvantaged pupils' KS2 attainment is 44% outside of London.

Educational outcomes among disadvantaged pupils vary far more than among their non-disadvantaged peers'.* For example, disadvantaged pupils' KS2 attainment spanned 44ppts in 2024, almost double the 24ppt spread in non-disadvantaged pupils'.**,[38] This suggests that there is significant potential for the lowest-performing schools and areas to improve disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.

The 'London effect'

London's outperformance of other regions is often referred to as the 'London effect'. This effect is particularly pronounced among disadvantaged pupils, as Figure 7 shows.

Figure 7 **KS2 and KS4 performance gap between London and England, by disadvantage status, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024. Notes: A positive number is a gap in favour of London. KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in their English and maths GCSEs. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8.

This was not always the case. Before the late 1990s, disadvantaged pupils in London performed no better (and sometimes worse) than those elsewhere,[39] while as recently as 2005, Inner London had the lowest overall GCSE results in England.[40] Today, its GCSE results (with 70.7% achieving a standard pass in English and maths) are second only to Outer London (72.6%),[41] and the capital's disadvantaged students are far ahead too.

Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies[42] and the University of Bristol[43] suggests that London's improvement is not unique. Pupils in other urban centres, like Manchester and Birmingham, also now do significantly better than those in the rest of the country. This may imply that there is a wider 'big city' effect.

* It does not necessarily follow that disadvantaged pupils' educational outcomes vary more than non-disadvantaged pupils', at a pupil level. By aggregating up to a local authority level, we may average out more of the variation in non-disadvantaged pupils' performance than in disadvantaged pupils'.

** This is the gap between the local authority areas with the best and the worst KS2 attainment. In 2024, the equivalent gap for KS4 attainment was 41ppts among disadvantaged pupils and 35ppts among non-disadvantaged pupils. And for KS4 progress: 1.68 points and 1.33 points, respectively.

A growing body of research has found that London's educational gains are, at least in part, the result of changing pupil demographics.[44] While the capital has always served a distinct pupil population – more ethnically diverse and with higher rates of English as an additional language (EAL) – these differences from the rest of the country have widened over time.[45]

Now, nearly half of primary school pupils in London have EAL (48%), compared to a quarter (23%) nationally.[46] Areas with more EAL pupils – like London boroughs – tend to see disadvantaged pupils perform better (discussed more below). And while two thirds of disadvantaged primary school pupils in England are from groups identified in other research[47] as being 'high-impact'– certain ethnicities where disadvantage tends to have a particularly severe effect on performance* – only 31% of those in London are.[48]

It is also possible that schools in London – particularly primary schools – are better than those elsewhere. In 2014, the Institute for Fiscal Studies argued that much of the improvement at KS4 stems from pupils entering secondary school with higher attainment.[49] In other words, the London effect is most apparent in primary schools.

Indeed, when children are just starting out their primary education at age five, there is less of a clear divide between performance in London and the rest of the country. While children in London still do best (70.0% achieved a 'good level of development'** in 2024), they are very closely followed by those in the South East (69.8%) and South West (69.2%).***,[50] The gap widens by the end of primary school.

One theory for this improvement is that London now attracts higher quality teachers, perhaps because of its desirability as a place to live. According to the Education Endowment Foundation, "the best available evidence" indicates that teacher quality explains a lot of the variation in pupil attainment.[51] But because good measures for teacher quality do not exist in England's official statistics,[52] it is difficult to test using publicly available data whether London does in fact simply have better teachers, or whether the quality of its teachers has increased over time, in a way that might explain its improved school performance.

Education policy initiatives might be another factor – London has been the target of several over the last 20 years. One example is the London Challenge, rolled out in primary schools in 2008 to reduce the number of low-performing schools in the capital. Critically, it established networks still in existence today that allow knowledge and experience to flow from good to underperforming London schools.[53] However, research has found that the London effect predates many of these initiatives.[54]

* This is a concept coined by FFT Education Datalab. These ethnicities are: Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, White British, White Gypsy/Roma, White Irish, and White Travellers of Irish heritage. We explore this in greater detail in the section 'What is behind England's performance gaps?'

** Defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals.

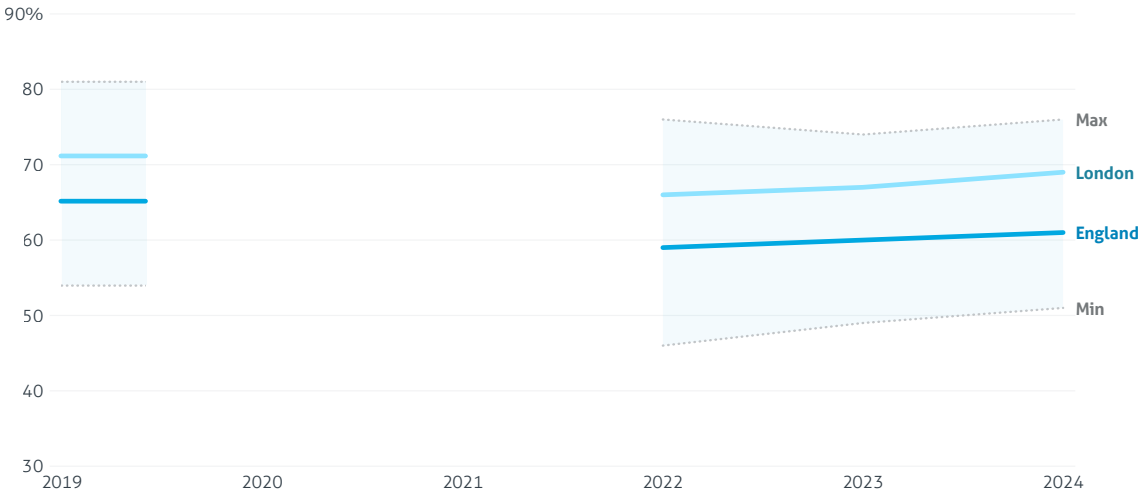
*** A recent Institute for Government report looks at the disparities in school readiness across England to inform the government's approach to closing the opportunity gap.

Performance gaps have widened since the pandemic

The inequalities in educational outcomes apparent in 2024 – between London and the rest of the country, between the worst- and best-performing local areas, and between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils – appear to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This section examines these changes.

London's advantage over other regions has grown

Figure 8 **KS2 attainment, by local authority, 2019–2024**



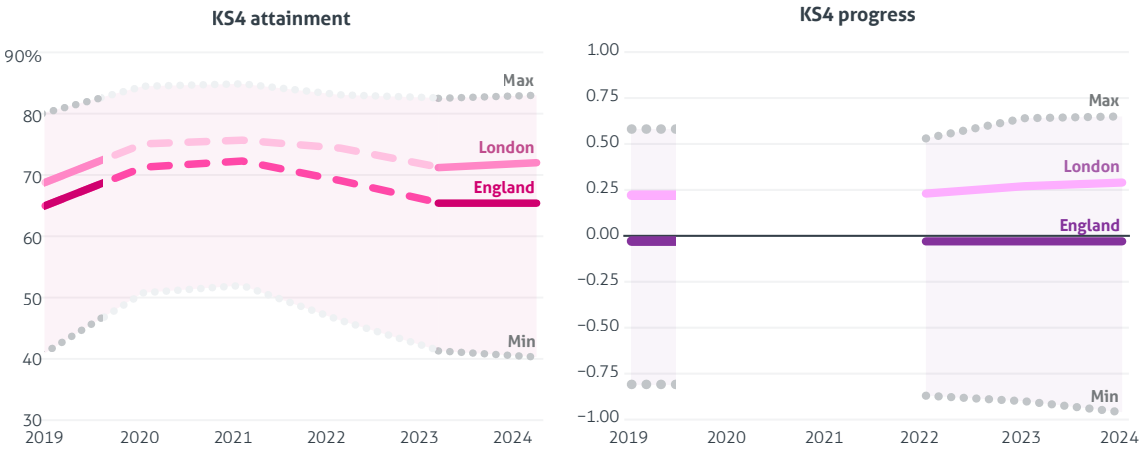
Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2019–24. Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS2 assessments did not take place in 2020 and 2021. Maximums and minimums exclude Isles of Scilly and City of London.

Between 2019 and 2024, KS2 attainment in England fell from 65% to 61%, driven by steep drops in maths and writing results.[1] Performance fell across all regions, although to a lesser extent in London – a fall of 2ppts.[2] As a result, the gap in KS2 attainment between London and the rest of the country has grown by half – from 6 to 9ppts – since the pandemic.*

Nationally, just 10 local authorities can say they have the same or better KS2 attainment than they did before the pandemic.[3] Six of these are in London.[4] Hackney stands out particularly – its KS2 attainment increased from 66% in 2019 to 74% in 2024,[5] a 6ppts bigger jump than that seen in any other local authority area.

* The gap between London and the rest of the country grew by 3ppts, but London's performance dropped by only 2ppts more than the rest of the country's. This discrepancy is just a result of rounding.

Figure 9 **KS4 performance, by local authority, 2019–2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS4 performance data, 2019–24. Notes: KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in their English and maths GCSEs. KS4 progress is measuring using Progress 8. GCSE results were awarded on the basis of centre-/teacher-assessment rather than external assessment in 2020 and 2021, while in 2022 they were set between pre-pandemic 2019 levels and 2024 levels, and in 2023 they were allowed to return to pre-pandemic levels, with some grading protections in place. Progress scores were not published in 2020 and 2021. Maximums and minimums exclude Isles of Scilly and City of London.

Broad stability in GCSE results and KS4 progress is to be expected at a national level. Meaningful changes in the distribution of GCSE grades awarded to pupils only happen if the exams regulator is satisfied that one cohort is performing notably better than another.[6] And, as previously mentioned, KS4 progress scores stay close to 0 by definition.

But we see a widening of the gap between London and other regions at KS4, as we did at KS2.[7] Outside London, KS4 attainment stayed the same between 2019 and 2024, at 64%.[8] In London, however, it rose by 3ppts, from 69% to 72%.[9] As a result, the gap between London's GCSE results and the rest of the country's nearly doubled between 2019 and 2024. Only one of the 56 local authority areas that saw KS4 attainment fall over that period was in London.[10] Outside the capital, average progress also stayed the same (around -0.07*) between 2019 and 2024.**,[11] In London, it rose from 0.22 to 0.29,***,[12] meaning the gap between London and the rest of the country grew by more than a quarter.

* The point estimate for average progress outside of London actually dropped from -0.07 in 2019 to -0.08 in 2024. This figure was calculated by the Institute for Government, so does not come with government-calculated confidence intervals. As such, we cannot be sure that this small drop represents a significant change.

** This does not mean that average progress outside of London was unaffected by the pandemic, just that these regions were affected in a similar way. Progress cannot be compared directly year on year, as progress scores tell you how an area/school did compared to the national average in that year.

*** The confidence interval for London's progress score in 2024 is higher than – and does not overlap with – the confidence interval for London's progress score in 2019. The point estimate for 2024 is 0.07 points higher than the point estimate for 2019.

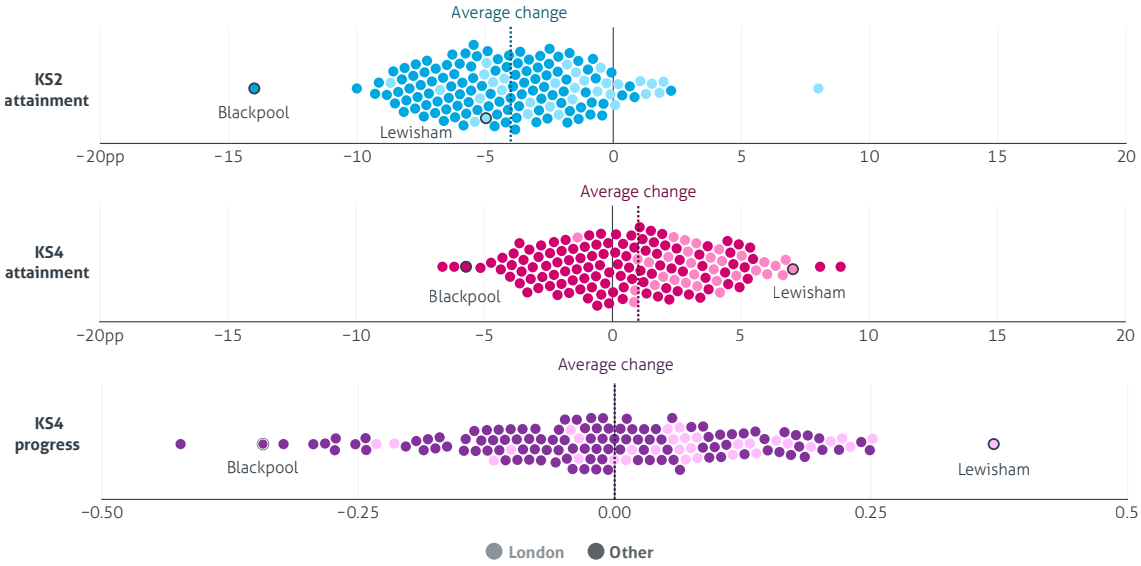
The disparity between London and the rest of the country also grew when looking at measures of disadvantaged pupils' performance. London was the only region where disadvantaged GCSE pupils had higher attainment in 2024 than in 2019.[13] And disadvantaged pupils' KS4 progress fell by only 0.03 points in London, a tiny drop when compared to the East of England and Yorkshire and the Humber – where there was the most change and where it fell by more than five times as much (0.17 points and 0.2 points).[*,14]

The gap between the worst- and best-performing areas has grown

The difference between the local authority areas with the highest and lowest KS2 attainment shrank by 2ppts between 2019 and 2024.[15] But at KS4, the range of educational outcomes has grown. In 2024, KS4 attainment spanned 43ppts at a local authority level, compared to 39 in 2019. For KS4 progress, the gap was 1.61 points in 2024, but only 1.39 in 2019.[16]

Many of these divergences have continued to grow since the end of pandemic lockdowns.

Figure 10 **Change in KS2 and KS4 performance between 2019 and 2024, by local authority**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2019–2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2019–2024. Notes: The average change is calculated at a local authority level. KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in their English and maths GCSEs. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8. Isles of Scilly and City of London excluded.

Schools in Lewisham stand out. Their KS4 progress increased by 0.37, representing a jump from the 13th percentile of progress scores in 2019 (near the bottom of the distribution) to the 75th in 2024.[17] This increase is bigger, by 0.12, than that experienced by schools in any other local authority.

[*] This calculation uses point estimates. London's disadvantaged progress in 2024 is lower than its disadvantaged progress in 2019, according to point estimates. But the upper bound of the 2024 confidence interval is equal to the lower bound of the 2019 confidence interval. This means that it is consistent with the data that disadvantaged pupils' progress stayed the same in London over this time period, but it could not have increased. The 2019 and 2024 confidence intervals do not overlap for Yorkshire or the East of England.

By contrast, Blackpool has experienced among the largest decreases since 2019 in every performance measure, except disadvantaged pupils' KS4 attainment.[18] For example, KS2 attainment in Blackpool fell from 67% in 2019 to 53% in 2024.[19] This drop is 10ppts bigger than the local authority average, driven by plummeting attainment among both its disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils.[20] Blackpool now has the third worst KS2 attainment in the country, despite performing better than 70% of local authority areas in 2019.[21]

The disparity between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils has grown

Disadvantage seems to be one of the best predictors of learning loss over the pandemic.[22] Disadvantaged children were less well-equipped for learning at home on average, with poorer access to digital devices, less support from parents and fewer quiet spaces to study.[23] They were also less likely to receive live online lessons from their schools and feedback from their teachers.[24]

When KS2 assessments resumed after the pandemic, the attainment gap widened to levels last seen in 2012.[25] Research from FFT Education Datalab, an education think tank, suggests that inequalities worsened in maths in particular.[26] The gap has since narrowed, but in 2024 it was still bigger than it was nearly a decade earlier, in 2015.[*,27] Half of disadvantaged pupils in England achieved the expected standard at KS2 in 2019 (51%), but only 46% did in 2024.[28] Only seven local authority areas – Bedford, Bolton, Doncaster, Dudley, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Stoke-on-Trent – saw an improvement in the KS2 attainment of disadvantaged pupils between 2019 and 2024.[29]

For both KS4 attainment and progress, disadvantaged pupils' performance fell on average between 2019 and 2024, while that of their better-off counterparts increased.[30] This growth in inequalities is particularly stark for KS4 progress. Disadvantaged pupils' progress scores dropped from -0.45 in 2019 to -0.57 in 2024.[31] Meanwhile, the progress scores of non-disadvantaged pupils rose from 0.13 to 0.16.[32]

* KS2 attainment among disadvantaged pupils and their better-off counterparts dropped by the same amount between 2019 and 2024 – 5ppts. It can still be true, however, that disadvantaged pupils' KS2 attainment was hit harder by the pandemic. The disadvantage gap index, which this sentence is derived from, is calculated by comparing the ranks of disadvantaged pupils with the ranks of their better-off counterparts. While the proportion of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils meeting expected standards may have fallen in line with each other, the attainment of disadvantaged pupils who didn't meet expected standards could have fallen more than their better-off peers', dropping their average rank. It is also possible that disadvantaged pupils' KS2 attainment did fall by more than their better-off counterparts', but that the rounding of the national KS2 attainment data disguises this.

What is behind England's performance gaps?

Policy makers need to understand what drives the growing performance gap in England's schools, which children are falling behind, and why, if they are to reverse the trend. This section examines local authority-level variation in pupils' absence rates, ethnicity, disadvantage and main language – as well as schools' funding – to assess how much these factors account for the local disparities outlined in the previous section.*

Other key drivers are hard to capture with publicly available data. For example, children's home environment plays a critical role in their educational outcomes. Lower levels of parental education, poor housing and negative parenting styles, among many other potential features of home life, tend to have adverse effects on a child's performance at school.[1] A child's disadvantage status will reflect only a limited subset of these important factors.

Teacher quality also likely explains a lot of the variation,[2] but as already mentioned, official public statistics lack reliable measures of it. Interestingly though, we can see that in areas where better-off pupils do well, disadvantaged pupils do too – these variables are strongly positively correlated.** The same is true for improvement rates since the pandemic.*** The most likely explanation for these relationships is that high-quality schools and peer effects drive up performance in both sets of pupils.

* See Annex for regional breakdowns of these school and pupil characteristics.
** See Regression 3 in the Methodology for full results. These relationships hold both within and outside of London, implying that they are not driven by London having higher educational outcomes among both non-disadvantaged and disadvantaged pupils.
*** See Regression 4 in the Methodology for full results. These relationships also hold within and outside of London, except for KS4 attainment, which is insignificant in London.

Figure 11 **Disadvantaged pupils' KS4 progress compared to non-disadvantaged pupils' KS4 progress, by local authority, 2024**

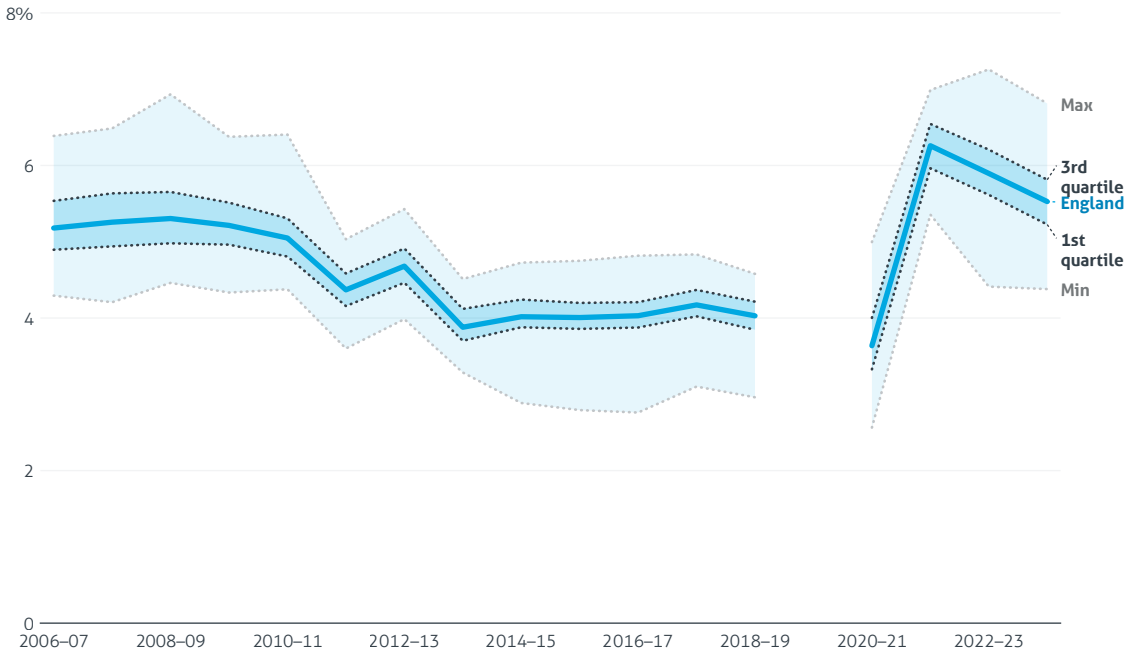
Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024. Notes: KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8. Isles of Scilly, City of London and Rutland are excluded.

Absence rates have rocketed since the pandemic, especially in secondary schools

Absence rates spiked in the wake of the pandemic,* reaching levels unseen since at least the 2006–07 academic year.[3] This likely reflects multiple factors, including a breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents, the growing mental health crisis in young people, unmet special educational needs, and rising levels of poverty.[4]

Absences are now falling in primary schools, but are still far from pre-pandemic levels.[5] Primary school pupils missed an average of 4.0% of sessions in 2018–19, compared to 5.5% of sessions in 2023–24.[6] The scale of this change becomes more evident at a local level. In 2018–19, the highest primary school absence rate seen in any area was 4.6% in Middlesbrough.[7] In 2023–24, the *lowest* absence rate was 4.4%, and Knowsley saw absence rates as high as 6.8%.[8]

Figure 12 **Primary school absence rate, by local authority, 2006–07 to 2023–24**

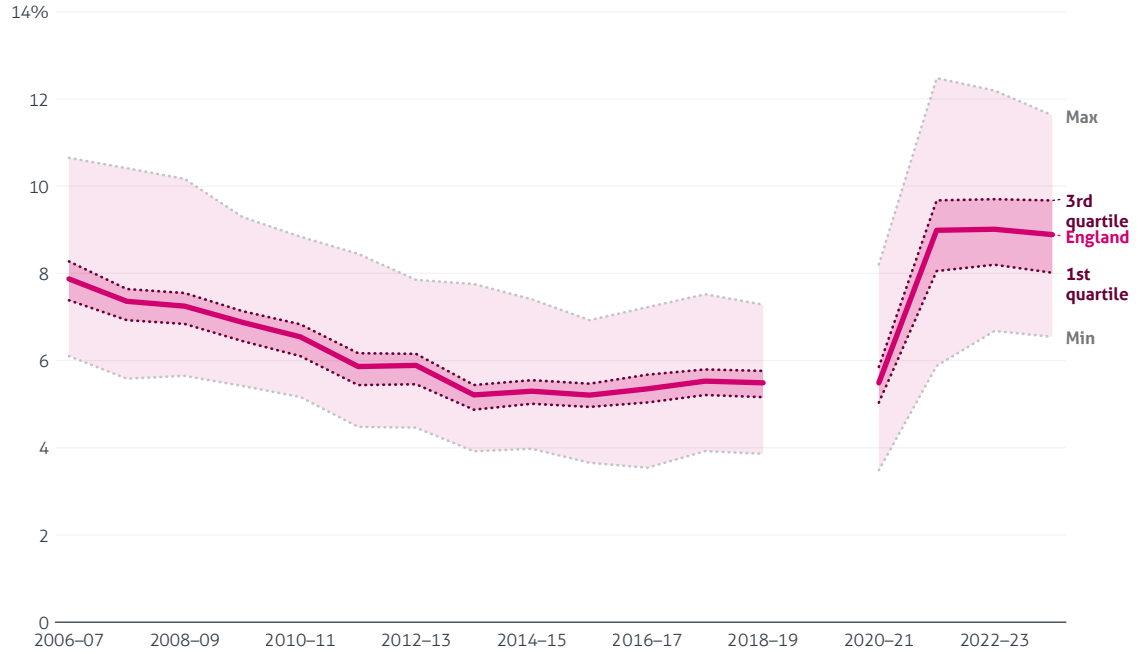


Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Absence data was not published in 2019–20. If a child was recorded as not attending due to Covid circumstances (as defined by DfE), that is not included as an absence. Isles of Scilly and City of London were excluded from calculation of minimum, maximum and the quartiles. One outlier was excluded in 2006–07, where absence was recorded as 0.2% in South Tyneside.

Secondary schools have been even more badly hit. Absence among secondary pupils rose from 5.5% in 2018–19 to 8.9% in 2023–24,[9] an increase of nearly two thirds. In some local authority areas, the average secondary school pupil missed more than half a day of school per week, or four weeks of teaching a year.[10]

* A session of absence is half a day of school that a pupil misses as a result of authorised or unauthorised absence. The overall absence rate is the percentage of all possible sessions that are missed by all pupils.

Figure 13 **Secondary school absence rate, by local authority, 2006–07 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2006–07 to 2023–24. Notes: Absence data was not published in 2019–20. If a child was recorded as not attending due to Covid circumstances (as defined by DfE), that is not included as an absence. Isles of Scilly and City of London were excluded from calculation of minimum, maximum and the quartiles.

Secondary school absence rates have hovered around the 9% peak for the last three years, with worryingly little sign of improvement.[11] They do now appear to be falling, albeit very slowly: the autumn term figures for 2024–25 are 0.2ppts lower than in the same period of 2023–24.[12]

Poor attendance has implications for pupils' performance.[13] Recent research from the Department for Education found that missing 10 days of Year 6 – an absence rate of around 5.3%, close to the national level in primary schools – made children 25% less likely to reach the KS2 expected standard.[14] The same absence rate at secondary school (as it is, far below the national level of 8.9%) reduced young people's likelihood of getting a grade 5 – a 'strong pass' – in their English and maths GCSEs by half.[15] Absences also hurt longer term outcomes, such as labour market returns.[16]

As the figures above show, variation in local areas' absence rates has increased dramatically since 2018–19. Our findings suggest that this is linked to the growing geographic disparities we see in KS2 attainment, KS4 attainment and KS4 progress.* In 2024, local areas with secondary school absence rates at the 75th percentile tended to have KS4 attainment 3.6ppts lower and progress 0.15 points lower than local areas with median rates of absence (61.9% versus 65.5%, or -0.17 versus -0.02). Reducing disparities in absence rates is critical to addressing inequalities in educational performance, and potentially in longer term outcomes.[17]

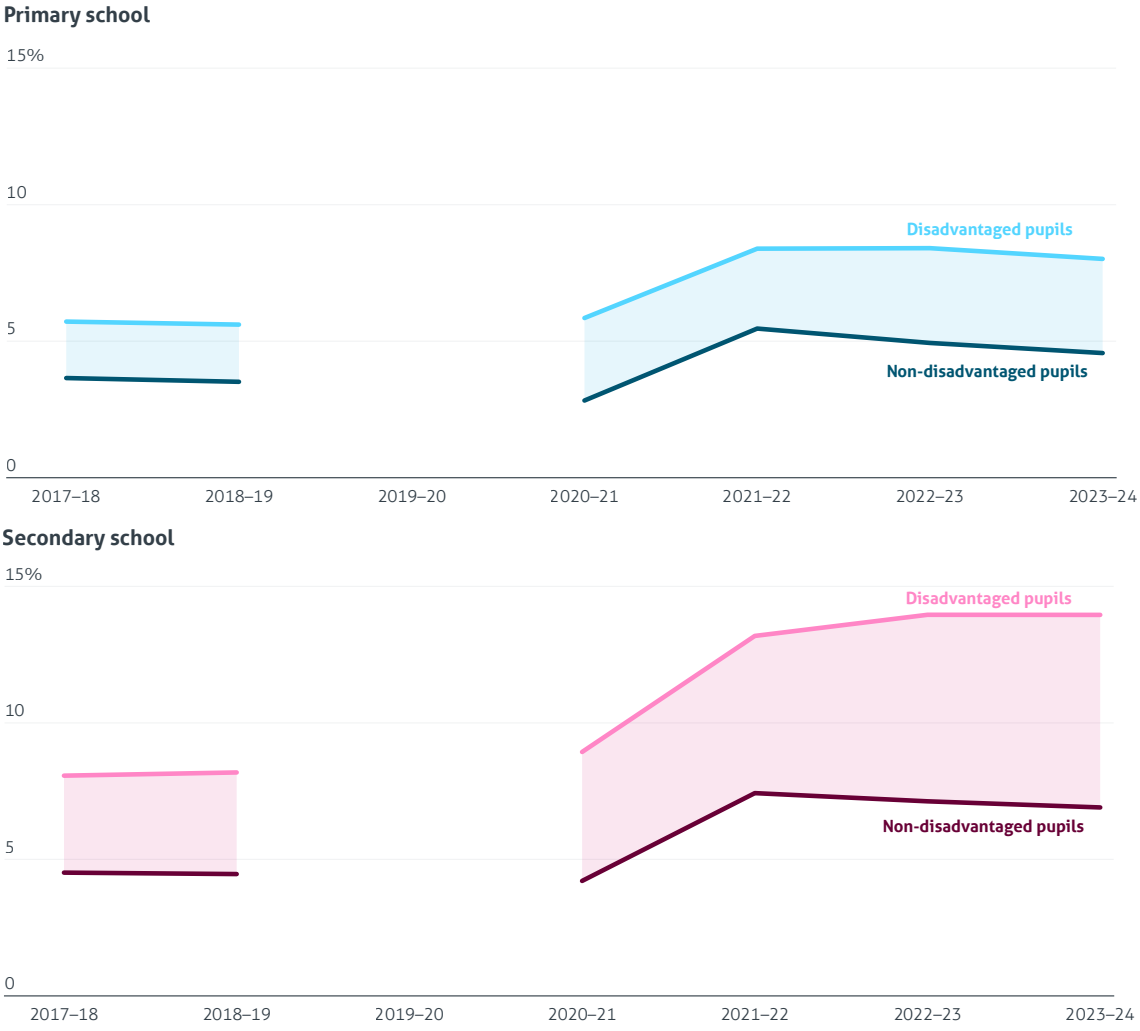
* Local authority areas with higher absence rates tend to perform worse, and those with lower absence rates tend to perform better. These relationships also hold within and outside of London, except for KS2 attainment, which is insignificant in London. See Regression 5 in the Methodology for the full results.

We have been here before, albeit not following a pandemic. In 1997, absence rates were similar to what they are now.[18] The Blair and Brown administrations responded with joined-up preventative measures that helped drive a sustained decline from the early 2000s onwards that helped bring rates of absence down to the relative lows of pre-2020.[19] A recent Institute for Government case study sets out what the current government could learn from this approach.[20]

The disadvantage gap in absence has widened, perpetuating inequalities in educational outcomes

Absence rates have risen more sharply among disadvantaged pupils.[21] In primary schools, absence rates increased by 2.4ppts between 2018–19 and 2023–24, over twice the 1.1ppt increase seen among non-disadvantaged pupils.[22] The difference was even starker in secondary schools, with rises of 5.8 and 2.4ppts respectively.[23]

Figure 14 **Primary and secondary school absence rate by disadvantage status, 2017–18 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2023–24. Notes: Absence data was not published in 2019–20, and was not published for disadvantaged pupils before 2017–18. If a child was recorded as not attending due to Covid circumstances (as defined by DfE), that is not included as an absence.

The disadvantage gap in absence rates has therefore widened, particularly at secondary school level. In 2023–24, disadvantaged pupils missed 14.0% of secondary school sessions – twice the rate of their better-off peers (6.9%).[24] The resulting 7.1ppt gap is also far greater than the equivalent 3.7ppt gap in 2018–19.[25] At primary school level, the gap grew from 2.1 to 3.4ppts.[26]

This helps to explain the divergence seen over the last five years between these groups' academic performance at KS4.* Controlling for changes in disadvantage rate, EAL rate and the ethnic composition of the disadvantaged group, if a local authority area's disadvantage gap in absence increased by 1ppt between 2018–19 and 2023–24, we would expect its disadvantage gap in KS4 attainment to grow by 0.6ppts and in KS4 progress to grow by 0.03 points. This suggests that, at a national level, the widening disadvantage gap in absence can account for all of the growth in the disadvantage gap in KS4 attainment and KS4 progress since 2018–19.**

By contrast, changing disadvantage gaps in KS2 attainment cannot be well-explained by changing disadvantage gaps in absence.*** In general, absence explains much less of the variation in primary school performance across council areas than in secondary school performance.**** This may reflect the fact that older pupils tend to have more control over their attendance, making absence a better measure of disengagement from education (and therefore a better predictor of performance) at secondary level.

There is a 'cliff edge' in performance for children from certain ethnic backgrounds

Each of the performance measures we look at in this report vary by ethnicity.[27] In 2024, pupils from a Chinese or Indian background were the top performers across all three,[28] with a respective 88% and 84% achieving standard passes in their English and maths GCSEs compared to 65% of all pupils.[29] At the other end, only 35% of pupils identifying as Travellers of Irish heritage, and 16% of those identifying as Gypsy or Roma, met that threshold.[30]

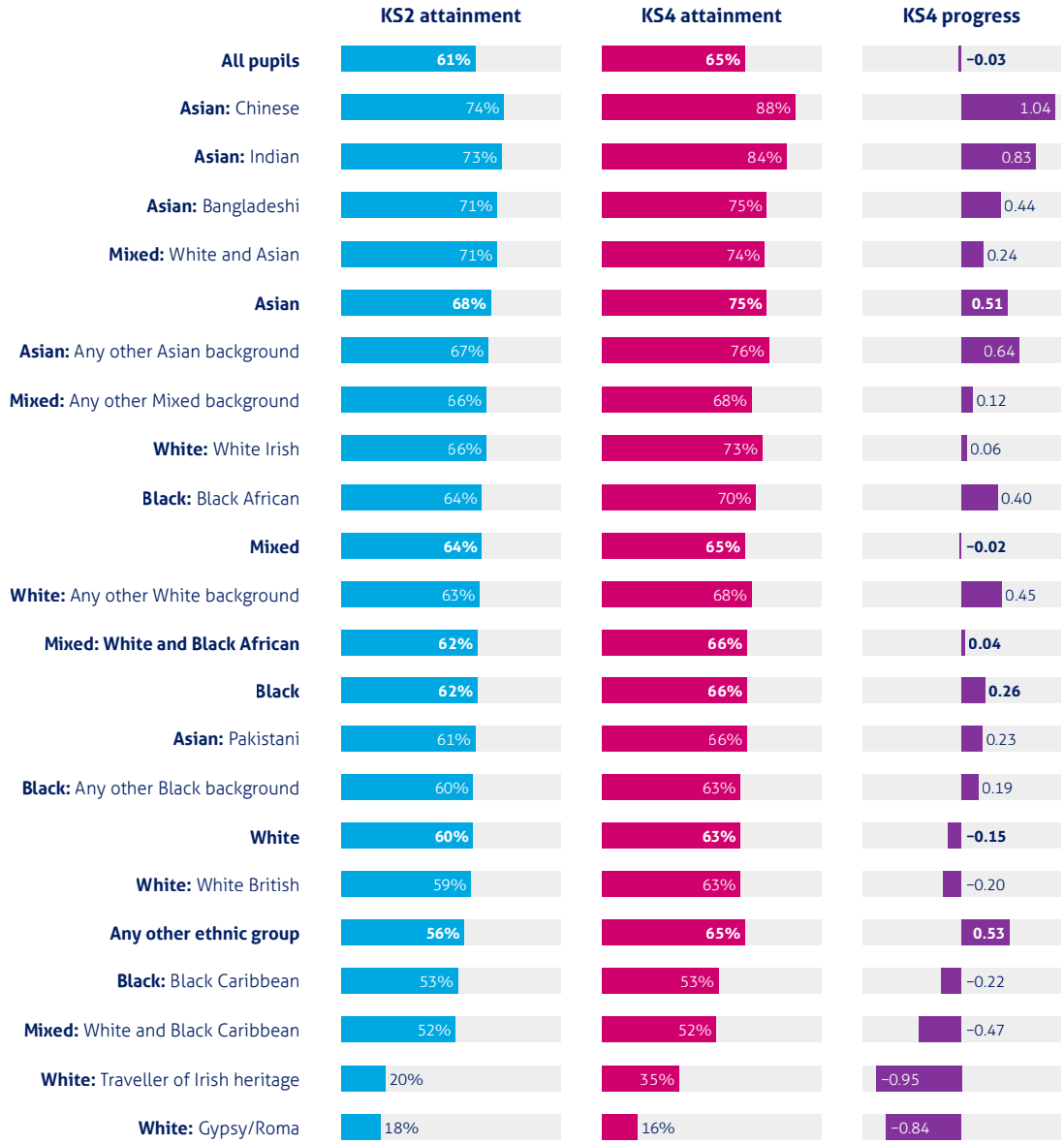
* On this measure, the disadvantage gap in KS2 attainment did not increase (see the earlier footnote in the section entitled 'The disparity between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils has grown'). See Regression 6 in the Methodology for the full results.

** There was a 3.3ppt increase in the disadvantage gap in absence, a 2.2ppt increase in the disadvantage gap in KS4 attainment and a 0.15 point increase in the disadvantage gap in KS4 progress. See the Methodology for details of the calculation.

*** See Regression 6 in the Methodology for the full results.

**** It explains 50% of the variation in KS4 attainment and 57% of the variation in KS4 progress, but only 10% of the variation in KS2 attainment. See Regression 5 in the Methodology for the full results.

Figure 15 **KS2 and KS4 performance, by ethnicity, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024 and DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024.
Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in GCSE English and maths. KS4 progress is measured using Progress 8. Results are not shown for pupils whose ethnicity is unclassified.

There are similarly striking disparities in KS4 progress, where Chinese pupils performed an average of one grade better in each of eight KS4 subjects than other pupils with similar KS2 attainment, and Travellers of Irish heritage performed an average of one grade worse.[31]

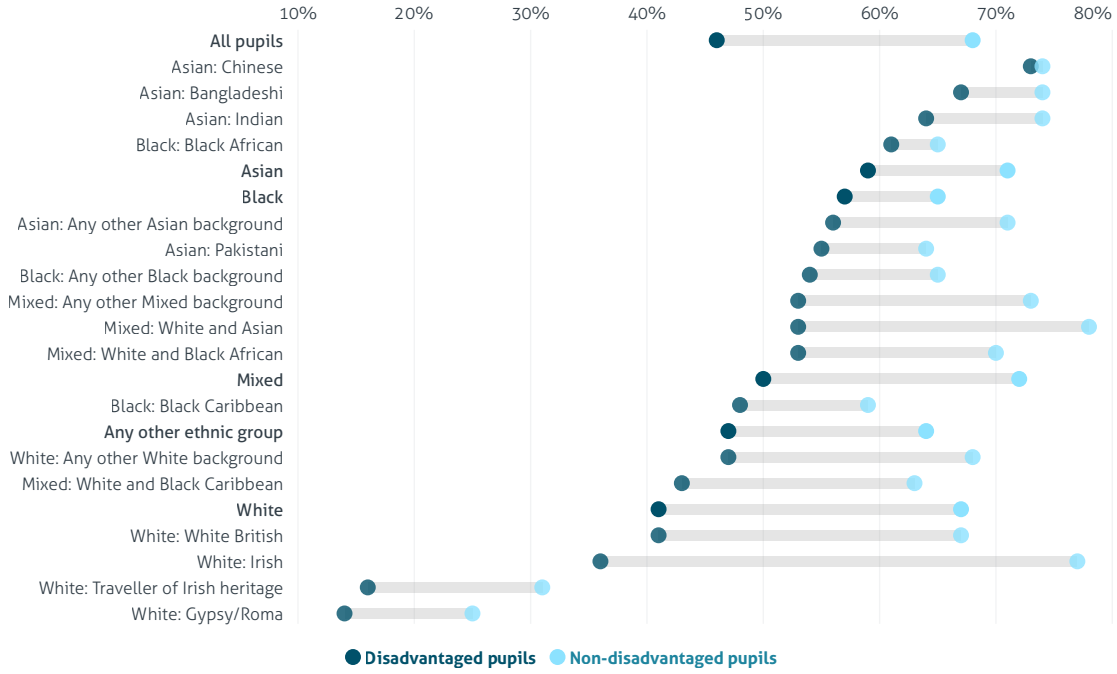
The 'cliff edge' that we see for children identifying as Gypsy, Roma, or as Travellers of Irish heritage is present right from the beginning of school.[32] Only 35% of these children achieved a 'good level of development' at Early Years Foundation Stage in 2024, far below the national average of 68%.

The government has set a target for 75% of *all* five-year-olds to have a good level of development by 2028.[33] But, as a recent Institute for Government report notes, if it directs its efforts only towards groups already close to the developmental benchmark – in effect abandoning those below the cliff edge – it risks widening inequalities that then persist throughout children's education.[34]

Disadvantaged White pupils have particularly poor educational outcomes

Disadvantage tends to have a greater impact on the attainment and progress of children from certain ethnic backgrounds. We can see this by looking at the performance of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils within ethnic groups.*

Figure 16 **KS2 attainment, by ethnicity and disadvantage status, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS2 performance data, 2024. Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. Results do not include pupils whose ethnicity is unclassified.

In 2024, there was only a 1ppt gap between the KS2 attainment of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils from Chinese backgrounds.**[35] KS2 attainment was 5ppts higher among disadvantaged Chinese pupils than among non-disadvantaged pupils in England.[36]

* This data is not publicly available for KS4 performance measures. For KS2 performance, it is only available at a national level.

** 623 disadvantaged pupils from Chinese backgrounds took KS2 assessments in 2024, as did 5,392 non-disadvantaged pupils from Chinese backgrounds.

Disadvantaged White Irish pupils, by contrast, lagged non-disadvantaged White Irish pupils by a massive 41ppts.[*,37] Only 36% met expected standards at KS2, compared to 46% of all disadvantaged pupils across England.[38] In fact, the only disadvantaged pupils with lower KS2 attainment than the national rate for disadvantaged pupils were those from White or Mixed White and Black Caribbean backgrounds.[39] Those identifying as Travellers of Irish heritage or Gypsy/Roma had even poorer outcomes, with even non-disadvantaged pupils in these groups performing below that level.[**,40]

These findings align with the research from FFT Education Datalab cited above that identifies a 'high-impact' group of pupils – those for whom disadvantage disproportionately affects performance.[41] In 2023–24, fully two thirds of disadvantaged pupils in primary schools, and 63% of disadvantaged pupils in secondary schools, were from this group.[42] It includes children from Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, White Irish, White Irish Traveller and White Gypsy/Roma backgrounds – but is composed mostly of White British children.

As the tables in the Annex show, as much as 84% of disadvantaged pupils in the North East were from these backgrounds in 2023–24, compared to only around 30%[***] in London – further explaining the findings of disadvantaged pupils' relative underperformance in the North East and overperformance in London.[****]

Variation is even starker at a local authority level. County Durham had almost all of its disadvantaged primary school cohort in this group in 2023–24 (94%).[43] By contrast, in Newham – the only local authority area in 2024 in which disadvantaged pupils outperformed the average non-disadvantaged pupil in England at KS2 – the equivalent figure was 12%.[44]

For all three measures we look at, local authority areas in the bottom fifth for the performance of their disadvantaged pupils were disproportionately likely to have above-average shares of disadvantaged pupils from the high-impact group (63–83%, depending on the performance measure) or, grouped differently, from White backgrounds (73–87%).[45]

The House of Commons Education Committee suggested that White British children's performance may be particularly negatively affected by disadvantage because they are more clustered in rural and coastal areas where there is "lower funding... higher teacher vacancies, longer travel times and worse digital infrastructure".[46] Factors from children's home environments, such as varying aspirations among parents from different ethnic backgrounds, also likely play a role.[47]

* 381 disadvantaged White Irish pupils took KS2 assessments in 2024, as did 982 non-disadvantaged White Irish pupils.

** 1,595 disadvantaged pupils from White Gypsy/Roma backgrounds and 395 disadvantaged pupils identifying as White Travellers of Irish heritage took KS2 assessments in 2024. For non-disadvantaged pupils, these figures were 773 and 119 respectively.

*** 31% in primary schools, 29% in secondary schools.

**** There are not many comparator local authority areas where high-impact groups are in the minority as they are in London, making this difficult to show.

It is difficult to isolate funding's effect on performance

The largest pot of funding that mainstream schools receive is the schools block element of dedicated schools grant funding, which is allocated to local authorities according to the National Funding Formula (NFF).[48] The NFF is designed to distribute funding based on the needs and characteristics of local areas, including rates of pupil disadvantage and the number of pupils with English as an additional language, among several other factors.

Funding levels also reflect differential staffing costs around the country,[49] compensating areas where it is inherently more expensive to run a school. Local authorities then distribute this funding to schools through their own formulae, which in most cases closely mirror the NFF. Our analysis uses the per-pupil funding that each local authority receives from this pot as a measure of funding at the local authority level.*

Local authority areas with higher levels of funding tend to have lower KS2 and KS4 attainment, and KS4 progress.** This is not surprising given that funding is systematically targeted towards areas with lower-attaining cohorts. After controlling for EAL and disadvantage rates, however, we find little evidence of a relationship between funding and these performance measures at a local authority level.***

This is not to say that additional funding is irrelevant to pupil performance: evidence collated by DfE suggests it likely has a modest positive influence.[50] But causality is very difficult to establish because funding is distributed with the aim of closing performance gaps.

The funding system delivers more for disadvantaged pupils in London

Per-pupil funding is higher in London than elsewhere: in secondary schools it is £7,337 but in other regions it does not get above £6,500.**** This largely reflects London's higher pay scale, which means it gets more funding in line with the NFF.

As Figure 17 shows, the funding gap between London boroughs and other local authorities is greatest where disadvantage is highest. In other words, funding is more targeted towards disadvantaged pupils in London than it is elsewhere***** (seen by the region's steeper 'lines of best fit'). ****** In London boroughs, each additional percentage point of disadvantage is associated with receiving £59 more in per-pupil primary school funding. For local authorities in the rest of the country, the boost to funding is only £15. At secondary school level, the equivalent increase in funding is £65 per pupil in London but only £29 elsewhere, less than half as much.

* We do not control for differences in purchasing power across local authorities, so results should be interpreted with caution. Funding figures are in 2023/24 prices.

** Although we see no effect of funding on KS2 attainment and KS4 progress in London. See Regression 7 in the Methodology for the full results.

*** Although outside of London, funding is still negatively correlated with KS2 attainment, and inside London, funding is positively correlated with KS4 progress. See Regression 8 in the Methodology for the full results.

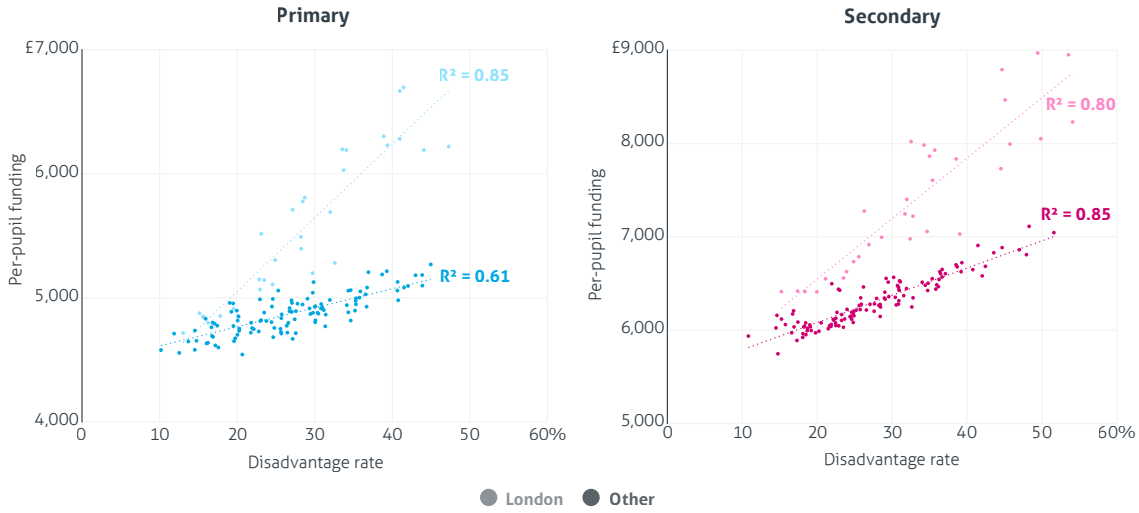
**** See tables in the Annex for full regional breakdowns.

***** See Regression 9 in the Methodology for the full results.

****** London's higher pay scales cannot explain why funding is more responsive to disadvantage in London than elsewhere. Pay adjustments would be expected to raise the overall level of funding – shifting the trendline upward – but not to steepen its slope.

Figure 17 **Primary and secondary per-pupil funding compared to disadvantage rate, by local authority, 2023–24**

Note: y-axis range differs for primary and secondary schools



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 2023–24 and DfE, 'National funding formula tables for schools and high needs: 2023 to 2024'. Notes: Disadvantage rates are for primary and secondary schools respectively. Funding figures are taken from schools block funding and therefore do not include Pupil Premium or high needs funding. For academies, the funding is for the academic year 2023–24; for maintained schools, it is for the 2023/24 financial year. Isles of Scilly and City of London are excluded.

This may reflect the bias of the funding system towards historical funding levels. Over time, schools in London have become less deprived relative to those in other areas.[51] But the funding available for disadvantaged pupils only gradually calibrates to this demographic shift,[52] meaning that many of London's schools are in effect receiving funding for disadvantaged pupils of previous academic years, even as their cohorts become less deprived.*

Disadvantaged pupils do better when there are more of them

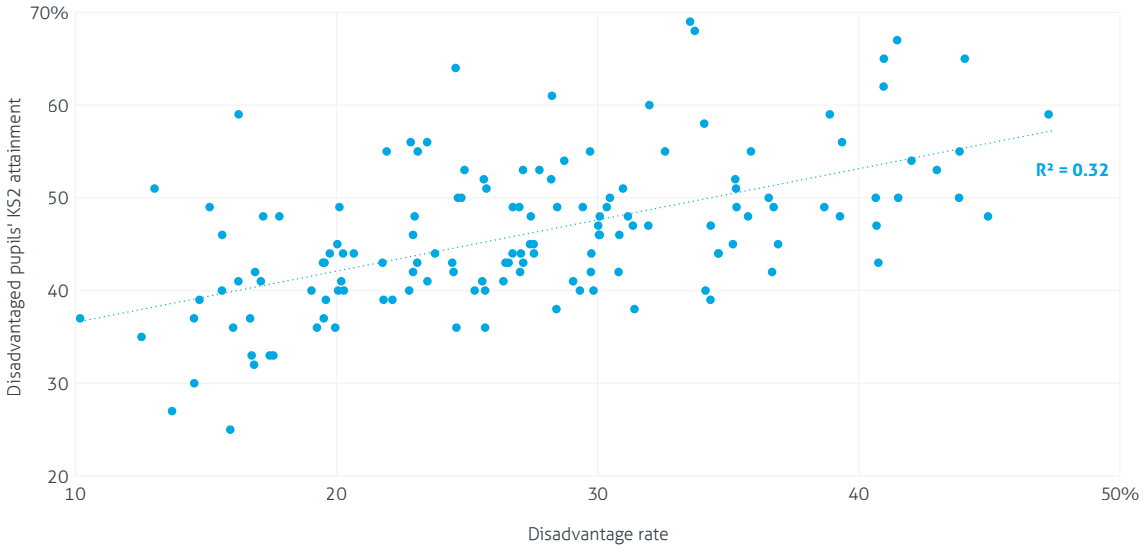
A recent Institute for Government report found that disadvantaged children performed better in Early Years Foundation Stage – the first year of primary school – when they made up a larger share of the pupil population.[53]

This trend continues through primary school – and beyond. Disadvantaged children tend to do better on each of our three measures in local authority areas where they make up a higher proportion of pupils.** For example, a council area with levels of primary school disadvantage at the 75th percentile typically has 2.9ppts more of its disadvantaged pupils meeting expected standards at KS2 than areas with median disadvantage rates (48.7% versus 45.8%). Similar relationships exist at secondary school level, but the correlation is weak.

* Another possible explanation is that London boroughs with higher levels of disadvantage also tend to have more pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), which attracts additional funding through the NFF. However, this does not appear to be true at a local authority level. See Regression 10 in the Methodology for full details.

** See Regression 11 in the Methodology for full results.

Figure 18 **Disadvantaged pupils' KS2 attainment compared to disadvantage rate, by local authority, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Key stage 2 performance', 2023–24 and DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 2023–24. Notes: KS2 attainment is the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. The chart shows the rate of disadvantage in secondary schools. City of London, Isles of Scilly and Rutland are excluded.

The National Foundation for Educational Research, Durham University and Ask Research found similar patterns at a school level.[54] Their research found that schools with larger proportions of disadvantaged pupils tended to see those pupils make more progress and have higher attainment at both KS2 and KS4. These findings are particularly relevant given how socio-economically segregated state-funded schools in England are. The Sutton Trust recently showed that, in the average local authority in England, 22% of state-funded pupils would need to move schools to achieve an even spread of disadvantage locally.[55]

The most obvious theory for why disadvantaged children do better when they make up a greater share of pupils is funding. Schools with more disadvantaged pupils have greater resources for interventions targeted at such pupils.* This theory may be correct at KS4: once funding is controlled for, disadvantaged pupils' KS4 performance no longer benefits from higher disadvantage rates.**

At KS2, however, disadvantaged pupils continue to do better when they are more numerous, even after accounting for the additional funding they receive.*** Given that funding does not appear to explain the relationship, we looked at four alternative explanations, each outlined below. To test their relative importance, we ran multivariate regressions that control for each factor, allowing us to isolate their effects (see Regression 13 in the Methodology for the full results).

* As discussed above, the National Funding Formula allocates more funding to areas with more disadvantaged pupils, all else being equal. The Pupil Premium – not included in our measure of funding – does the same.

** Disadvantage rates actually have a negative effect on disadvantaged pupils' KS4 attainment and KS4 progress once funding is controlled for. See Regression 12 in the Methodology for the full results.

*** See Regression 12 in the Methodology for the full results.

The London effect, again?

The first potential explanation is that the patterns simply reflect London's differences. London has both higher rates of disadvantage and better performance among disadvantaged pupils than the rest of the country, which could be driving the overall trend. However, when we analysed separately local authority areas within London and those outside it, the same relationship holds: disadvantaged pupils do better at KS2 where disadvantage rates are higher.* This suggests that the pattern is not solely a regional artefact, but reflects a broader relationship between the two variables.

Ethnicity

The second possible explanation is ethnicity. Areas with more disadvantaged pupils typically have fewer from high-impact (or low-performing) ethnic groups.** This may be all that is behind the relationship between disadvantage rates and disadvantaged pupils' performance. But again our analysis shows that while ethnicity can explain part of this pattern, it cannot explain it all. Even if the share of disadvantaged pupils from high-impact groups was held constant, the performance of disadvantaged pupils would still vary with local disadvantage rates.

Better primary schools...

The third possible explanation is that disadvantaged pupils may go to higher quality primary schools than non-disadvantaged pupils on average. This seems unlikely, but we need to test it to make sure. If it were the case, schools with more disadvantaged pupils (higher quality schools) would benefit disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils' performance equally.

... or primary schools that are better set up to teach poorer children

The final potential explanation is that primary schools may be better set up for disadvantaged pupils' needs when those pupils make up a greater share of the school population. If this were true, we would expect disadvantaged pupils to benefit more from high disadvantage rates than their better-off counterparts.

To disentangle those two final effects, we control for non-disadvantaged pupils' performance. We find that disadvantaged pupils' KS2 performance benefits more from high rates of disadvantage than non-disadvantaged pupils'.*** This is consistent with our fourth explanation – a primary school is, on average, better suited to disadvantaged pupils when there are more of them. (Disadvantaged pupils actually tend to be concentrated in the worst-performing schools, the opposite of explanation three.)[56]

So, it does appear that primary schools with more disadvantaged pupils are better equipped to support them. This may reflect their greater knowledge of, and experience in, tailoring education to these pupils' needs. **The government should therefore develop networks for these schools to share learnings with those that have fewer disadvantaged pupils.**

* Inside London, disadvantage rates only just become insignificant at the 5% level. Outside London, they are still highly significant and positive. See Regression 13 in the Methodology for full results.

** See Regression 14 in the Methodology for the full results.

*** Disadvantage rates are significant (or very close to significant) even once non-disadvantaged pupils' performance is controlled for. See Regression 13 in the Methodology for the full results.

Speaking English as an additional language boosts performance, but this is mostly due to ethnicity

Pupils who speak English as an additional language tended to outperform their peers in 2024.* Some 62% met expected standards at KS2 (versus 60% of non-EAL pupils);[57] 70% achieved standard passes in their English and maths GCSEs (versus 65%);[58] and their average progress at KS4 was 0.51, compared to -0.13 among non-EAL pupils.[59] The gap in KS4 progress is particularly big, amounting to nearly two thirds of a grade in each of eight subjects. In fact, EAL pupils had higher average progress scores than their peers in every local authority area in 2024.[60]

These gaps can largely be explained by the fact that EAL pupils tend to be from higher performing ethnic backgrounds. Research from the University of Oxford compares EAL and non-EAL pupils within the same ethnic group – something not possible using publicly available data – and shows that EAL pupils actually perform worse at KS2 and no better at KS4 when compared with their own ethnic groups.[61]

Most of the EAL gap in progress can also be explained by ethnicity, although EAL pupils do still have marginally better progress scores than non-EAL pupils from the same ethnic background.[62] This likely reflects that some EAL pupils' KS2 results understate their ability, as they lack the English skills to fully access the tests. As their English proficiency improves, their GCSE results tend to offer a truer picture of their ability, leading to above average KS4 progress scores.

Disadvantaged pupils perform better in areas with more EAL pupils, largely due to differences in ethnic composition

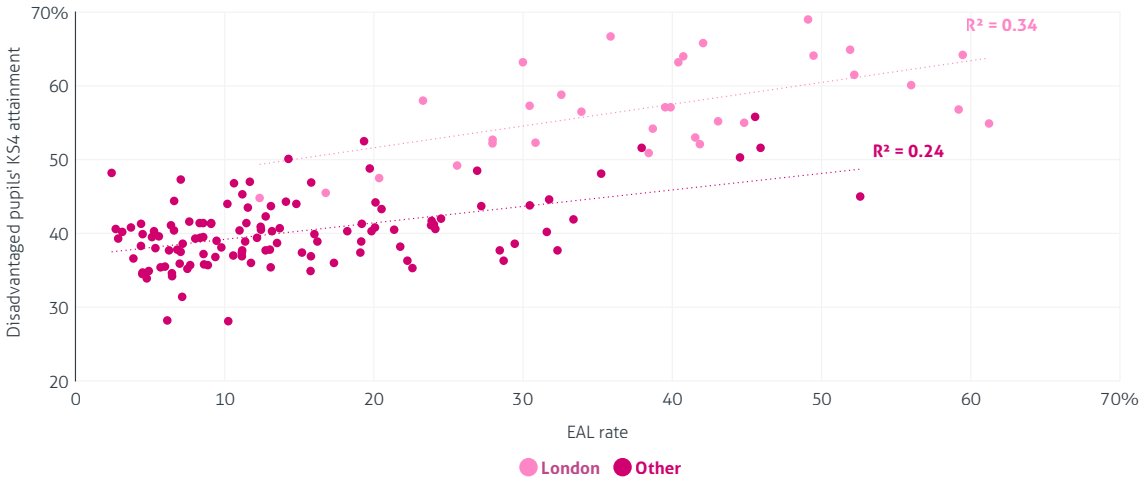
DfE does not publish data that allows us to analyse the performance of disadvantaged EAL and disadvantaged non-EAL pupils directly. However, local authority areas with a higher proportion of EAL pupils tend to have higher KS2 attainment, KS4 attainment and KS4 progress among their disadvantaged pupils – in each case, the relationship is moderate or strong.**

For example, a local authority area with a level of EAL pupils at the 75th percentile has on average 1.8ppts more disadvantaged pupils getting standard passes in their English and maths GCSEs than in an area with median levels of EAL pupils (in London: 59.2% versus 57.4%; in the rest of the country: 41.3% versus 39.5%).

* Looking at this group together conceals significant variation. Ultimately, the biggest factor in these pupils' performance is their proficiency in English, which differs a lot across EAL pupils.

** See Regression 15 in the Methodology for full results.

Figure 19 **Disadvantaged pupils' KS4 attainment compared to EAL rate, by local authority, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, KS4 performance data, 2024 and DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 2023–24. Notes: KS4 attainment is the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in GCSE English and maths. The EAL rate is the proportion of secondary school pupils for whom English is an additional language. City of London, Isles of Scilly and Rutland are excluded.

Neither funding levels nor disadvantage rates can explain these patterns.* Instead, they appear to be driven by differences in local authorities' ethnic compositions.** Areas with many pupils from high-impact ethnic backgrounds tend to have fewer EAL pupils.*** This is because the high-impact group is made up mostly of White British pupils, who overwhelmingly speak English as a first language. So the strong performance of disadvantaged pupils in areas with high EAL rates is less about language background itself and more about having fewer disadvantaged pupils from historically low-attaining ethnic groups.

* See Regression 16 in the Methodology for full results.
** See Regression 17 in the Methodology for full results.
*** See Regression 18 in the Methodology for full results.

Conclusion

The pandemic had a severe and lasting effect on educational inequalities across England. The gap has widened since 2019, with some areas of the country struggling significantly more than others. Tackling high absence rates – particularly among disadvantaged pupils – will be key to narrowing these educational inequalities. A recent Institute for Government case study shows the importance of preventative and joined-up working in bringing absences down.[1]

Disadvantaged pupils are falling even further behind their peers. Despite the new government's commitment to closing this gap in the form of its opportunity mission, it has not yet articulated a clear vision or plan for delivering this goal. The National Tutoring Programme, which ran from 2020/21 to 2023/24 to address the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged pupils' educational outcomes, appears to have had limited success.[*,2]

Pupil Premium funding, a relatively well-evidenced policy for supporting disadvantaged pupils' attainment, fell by 3% in real terms between 2018–19 and 2023–24.[3] According to the Public Accounts Committee, the government's rationale for this "is not clear".[4] School leaders are also increasingly diverting those funds to cover school-wide budget shortfalls: almost half of schools that responded to a 2024 Sutton Trust survey (47%) reported doing so, up from 23% in 2019.[5]

It will be critical to share best practice. A central lesson from the London Challenge – credited by some for London's outperformance of the rest of the country – was the power of structured collaboration.[6] It established networks still in existence today that allow knowledge and experience to flow from good to underperforming London schools. Moreover, disadvantaged pupils often achieve better results in areas where they are more numerous, suggesting that familiarity with their needs has led to more effective, tailored educational approaches. The government should facilitate that experience being shared more widely to help narrow the disadvantage gap.

Finally, this report illustrates that many differences in performance can be attributed to differences in demographics. This suggests that the government's opportunity mission[7] – to break the link between a child's background and their future success – is a good starting point for narrowing educational inequalities. However, as recent Institute for Government work highlights, the government must ensure that any targets it sets do not unintentionally lead policy makers to prioritise children just short of the mark over those who are furthest behind and need support the most.[8] Otherwise, it risks reinforcing the very inequalities it aims to remove.

The pandemic brought with it the biggest disruption to children's lives and schooling in a generation. Now, as its immediate effects retreat, the government must work to understand the more lasting impacts to give itself the best chance of success on its mission to ensure no children are left behind.

* The impact of the National Tutoring Programme is difficult to assess as it was fraught with poor evaluation practices.

Annex

These tables show the characteristics of schools and pupils discussed in the 'What is behind the performance gaps?' chapter, for each region of England in the 2023–24 academic year.

Figure 20 **Characteristics of primary schools and their pupils, by region, 2023–24**

Region	Pupils	Absence	Disadvantage	EAL	Per-pupil funding	Disadvantaged pupils in 'high-impact' groups
North East	210,000	5.7%	34.1%	10.0%	£5,008	83.9%
North West	639,000	5.6%	28.8%	19.4%	£4,963	70.6%
Yorkshire and The Humber	462,000	5.7%	28.0%	19.0%	£4,923	70.3%
East Midlands	394,000	5.4%	25.5%	19.5%	£4,878	75.7%
West Midlands	512,000	5.8%	30.7%	24.1%	£4,932	59.5%
East of England	514,000	5.5%	21.9%	18.7%	£4,795	73.6%
London	677,000	5.3%	27.2%	48.2%	£5,474	31.2%
South East	720,000	5.4%	20.9%	18.0%	£4,713	75.6%
South West	410,000	5.6%	20.8%	11.2%	£4,827	83.7%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 2023–24; DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2023–24 and DfE, 'National funding formula tables for schools and high needs: 2023 to 2024'. Notes: The chart shows the full-time equivalent number of pupils, rounded to the nearest thousand. 'EAL' stands for English as an additional language. Funding figures are in 2023/24 prices. They are the schools block element of dedicated schools grant funding and therefore do not include Pupil Premium or high needs funding. For academies, the funding is for the academic year 2023–24; for maintained schools, it is for the 2023/24 financial year. Pupils from 'high-impact' groups are from certain ethnic backgrounds in which disadvantage tends to have a greater impact on performance – this is a concept coined by FFT Education Datalab.

Figure 21 **Characteristics of secondary schools and their pupils, by region, 2023–24**

Region	Pupils	Absence	Disadvantage	EAL	Per-pupil funding	Disadvantaged pupils in 'high-impact' groups
North East	167,000	9.8%	33.3%	8.0%	£6,405	84.0%
North West	471,000	9.1%	30.4%	15.6%	£6,393	69.2%
Yorkshire and The Humber	359,000	9.7%	29.7%	15.6%	£6,350	67.4%
East Midlands	319,000	9.0%	25.9%	15.7%	£6,213	74.1%
West Midlands	413,000	9.0%	31.8%	21.0%	£6,428	57.4%
East of England	427,000	8.6%	22.0%	14.0%	£6,185	71.9%
London	581,000	7.4%	32.5%	39.4%	£7,337	28.5%
South East	589,000	8.9%	20.9%	14.5%	£6,128	72.7%
South West	342,000	9.8%	22.4%	8.9%	£6,103	82.8%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 2023–24; DfE, 'Pupil absence in schools in England', 2023–24 and DfE, 'National funding formula tables for schools and high needs: 2023 to 2024'. Notes: The chart shows the full-time equivalent number of pupils, rounded to the nearest thousand. 'EAL' stands for English as an additional language. Funding figures are in 2023/24 prices. They are the schools block element of dedicated schools grant funding and therefore do not include Pupil Premium or high needs funding. For academies, the funding is for the academic year 2023–24; for maintained schools, it is for the 2023/24 financial year. Pupils from 'high-impact' groups are from certain ethnic backgrounds in which disadvantage tends to have a greater impact on performance – this is a concept coined by FFT Education Datalab.

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What is behind England's performance gaps?

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About the author

Amber Dellar

Amber is a researcher on the Institute's public services team. She has a BA in politics, philosophy and economics. After graduating, she worked as a researcher at the Centre for Public Data. She has also worked at xantura, a tech company that uses local government data to prevent social problems.

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enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

+44 (0) 20 7747 0400

@ instituteforgov.bsky.social

Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom

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